

# Regionalism and the Canadian Identity Crisis

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Nations come and nations go, societies change and societies adapt. But what happens to a society that can't adapt to change? In the most extreme situations, there will be civil war. At the very least there is dissension. Inevitably, the society will develop a new identity and a sense of unity. A society must have a strong self-identity and self-awareness before it can determine its position internationally. Typically, the most 'successful' nations such as Japan, America, or Germany, are those with the highest national identity, or the least amount of regionalistic 'in-fighting'. Self-identity is necessary if one is to accurately determine how to react to non-self. Often we associate non-identity with extremely regionally fractionated countries such as Russia, or the former Yugoslavia. However, such is not always the case. Appearances of some countries may be deceiving. Although a seemingly peaceful and unified nation, Canada is also fighting to understand its own identity. At times on the verge of separation or violence, Canada is having its share of problems coming to terms with its national identity, a condition which has been worsening progressively as Canada continues to change.

The study of this nation is of particular interest to me. Aside from its unique and unusual demographics, geography, and history, it is the country where I was born and raised. As a Canadian, I am very aware of what my country has to offer, and feel more than fortunate to be a citizen. However, I am also aware of the feeling of non-identity shared by many Canadians. We truly lack an awareness of what makes our country unique and independent. We lack self-identity.<sup>1)</sup> What is a Canadian and how are we unique? Ironically, this identity crisis, perhaps the worst of our approximately 500 year history, is one of the things which binds us together as Canadians.

Why do Canadians have so much trouble articulating what they are? What exactly is the Canadian identity? I have written this paper to explore these very questions and

to give an overview of the underlying causes of this lack of identity. Before delving into causes, I feel it is helpful to discuss the popular perceptions of Canada from the point of view of Canadians, as well as from an international point of view. Next I will proceed to the factors shaping the current identity crises. The first and foremost, although little known to non-Canadians, is regionalism, which has worked against Canadian unity since confederation in 1867. The overlap and influence of the pervasive American culture will of course be discussed, as well as Canada's internal conflict involving its English and French heritage. Another more recent phenomenon affecting Canada's awareness of self is multiculturalism. Although not unique in itself, the way multiculturalism has developed in the country is unlike any other. After these discussions, I will try to summarise the Canadian identity as perceived by one individual, that individual being myself, of course. After spending two months driving through every Canadian province and interviewing as many people as possible, I have been able to draw some conclusions regarding the country as a whole.

Although this article often refers to geography, it contains no maps or photos. It would be beneficial for understanding certain aspects of this article if the reader had an atlas at hand. In spite of the very Canadian viewpoint, I hope the reader is able to pull out some useful information and assimilate it into her or his collective experience of the modern world.

## The Canadian Self Perception

Canadians are confronted with the challenge of defining what they have that makes them unique. They lack the rich heritage and mythology of nations like Japan, studies of classic art and literature are by necessity from other countries, and their cuisine has not evolved, but rather, has been borrowed. As a matter of fact, Canada really has no typical cuisine. Therefore, when confronted with the question, "What is the Canadian Identity?", most Canadians I spoke with had extreme difficulty articulating their thoughts. Even with explanatory prompts such as, "Who are we as Canadians?", "What do we represent?", and "How are we unique?", most people took considerable time coming up with a response. It was actually this hesitation which steered me in the direction I took with this paper. Admittedly, the question on Canadian Identity was a difficult one to answer. It is a difficult task to define something without making

comparisons to something else. However, in posing such a question I was better able to understand the causes of the apparent identity crises. I would like to point out that the majority of people interviewed were the ones most accessible to me—namely English-speaking, non-Aboriginal Canadians. Although French and Native opinions are represented here, consensus opinions are largely from the English-speaking majority.

When people eventually formulated an answer to the question involving Canadian identity, there were several frequently mentioned topics. That Canadians are a lot like the Americans was a common response, but often qualified with a remark such as “but only in some ways”. Although outwardly similar to Americans, there is something which makes them different. It’s a feeling which all Canadians understand, but apparently have difficulty articulating.

Nature was also a recurring theme in interviews. Coming from a very small logging town on the west coast of Vancouver Island, I have always felt a connection with the wilderness. I was somewhat surprised, however, to find that even people brought up in Vancouver, Toronto, and Halifax have much the same feeling about nature that I do. Even city dwellers associate Canada with nature. It’s actually quite similar to the Japanese mentality. Even when people are forced to live away from nature, they still maintain a very strong feeling of being a part of it.

The multicultural nature of Canada was repeatedly discussed. Even people who have never been abroad seem aware that the country is unusual with respect to multiculturalism. Although there are mixed feelings about it, Canadians seem to agree with its basic principles, and enjoy the opportunity of exposure to other languages and cultures. It was interesting to note that when people spoke of other cultures, they often neglected to mention the indigenous Native cultures, which are most certainly a part of the Canadian identity.

Always a topic of heated debate in Canada, bilingualism and the unique English-French culture was considered one of the most important factors in defining Canadian identity. Ironically, one of the things which is the greatest threat to the unity of Canada is also one of the things which is perceived as being the most ‘Canadian’.

Many also feel that as a people Canadians are quite benevolent. Although not a politically socialist society, there are highly developed social programmes, such as government run health care, unemployment insurance, social welfare, and a pension plan. Although the cost to the taxpayer is very high (for some Canadians, more than

50% of wages earned will eventually find their way into the government coffers), most people do not object that taxes should be used to pay for these programmes, even though most people may never benefit from them directly. It should be stated that Canadians do have very strong objections to the current high taxation, but for different although not completely unrelated reasons.

The clearest answers I received were from those who have lived away from Canada. It seems that they have been able to put aside their regional bias and have an overall and objective look into the country. Most certainly travelling gives a greater understanding and tolerance of other cultures and ideas. This results in greater acceptance of Canada's multicultural and regional structure, and a greater feeling that Canada is a unified country. Looking in from the outside certainly makes a Canadian appreciate what Canada has to offer and what it stands for. In fact, Canadians living abroad often develop a species of super-patriotism much along the lines of American patriotism. You don't have to look very far when you travel to find a Canadian with a very visible flag on her or his backpack. Expatriates also have the opportunity to meet other Canadians abroad, interacting with them on the level of 'Canadian', and not 'western Canadian' or 'eastern Canadian'. From this group of people I was inevitably told that Canada is a unique, remarkably untouched country. That the country is unique in terms of its bilingual heritage and multiculturalism was also mentioned, but with much greater understanding. Most expats who have tried living anywhere, in particular in countries where they have been a visible minority, can appreciate how unique Canada is in its acceptance of other cultures. It was also the travellers who seemed most aware that part of Canadian identity is its lack of identity and its exceptionally heterogeneous society.

## The International Image of Canada

From several years living abroad in several different countries, I have observed a trend in the international opinion of Canada. Although the images related by non-Canadians are often quite accurate, they are also often distorted or simplified. If asked what Canada is like, the average response is likely to be much the same as for America. Considering Canada's relatively minor role in international power politics and its minimal coverage in the international media, it's not surprising that people

have difficulty differentiating between the two countries. Even people who do have a unique opinion are likely to respond with words like 'nature', or 'cold'. These stereotypes are of course true, otherwise it's unlikely they would have become stereotypes. However, although nature is apparent almost everywhere, Canadians do not fight their way through old-growth forests to get to work every morning. Although largely considered a rural country, Canada is actually a nation of city dwellers, with 4 out of 5 people people living in cities.<sup>2)</sup> Nor is Canada the perpetual deep freezer that is generally believed. Although winter temperatures may easily reach  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , summers are hot and dry.

Little is generally known about the country's politics or economics. Non-Canadians often have a strong impression that Canada is predominantly French speaking. In fact, if only one of the ten provinces can be named, chances are that province will be Québec. This is understandable in light of the extensive media coverage the Québec separatists and Canada's endless constitutional debates have drawn. Not to mention Québec's unmistakable presence on the Canadian map. Being the largest province and having a central location, it does make a lasting impression at a glance. However, Québec is the *only* official French-speaking province. All other provinces and territories are predominately English speaking. Although Québec is the only French province, it is also one of the most populous provinces. Between Québec and the French populations scattered through several other provinces, French Canadians make up approximately twenty five percent of the country's population.

Another common impression is that the economy depends upon the single industry of forestry. The long standing stereotype of the Canadian lumberjack is a hard one to dispel. Although in many parts of the country forestry is a major industry, on the whole Canada is steering away from its dependence upon resource-based industries and turning towards the manufacturing of value added products. Canada is every bit as economically diverse as any other developed nation, but seems enshrouded in images of its history of logging and trapping.

## Regionalism in Canada

Any discussion of Canadian identity and self-perception eventually involves the concept of regions. Being such a large and diverse country, it is only natural that people

form associations with each other based on things which they have uniquely in common. It is precisely this regional association which causes disharmony within Canada. They have no difficulty relating to each other within their regions; however, on a national level Canadians have great difficulty finding a common thread which defines them as one people. Hence the problem of poor self-identity. Although some countries like Japan or the United States are able to define regions within themselves, collective consciousness is generally geared toward the country as a unit. In Canada, however, regional consciousness is often stronger than national consciousness. It's important for non-Canadian readers to keep in mind that Canada is a uniform political region only when viewed by people and other countries outside of Canada.<sup>3)</sup>

Although it has long been a problem, regionalism has become a major issue over the last decade. The 1982 constitutional reform began the process of strong regional polarisation, which was intensified with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was also effected in 1982. The charter, highlighting individual rights is consequently weakening collective rights. The resulting regionalism is fostering a form of competition which is serving to alienate Canadians. Instead of acting as a cohesive whole as Americans do, a form of regionalistic protectionism is occurring. People are losing concern for the well being of Canada as a unit, concentrating instead on the well being of their respective regions. In some cases, separatist movements have begun. The classic example of this is of course Québec, which is also the province with the strongest regional consciousness. There have been Western separatist movements as well, however the true Western separatists are few compared to those supporting Québec's separatist *Parti Québécois*.

### **The Five Regions**

There are of course many ways of dividing a country. Political boundaries, geographical features, economies, industry, or even cultural background can be used as dissecting tools to reduce a large country into smaller, workable parts. The formation of regions in Canada has usually been based on a combination of these factors. With the exception of provincial and territorial borders, the various regions of Canada are not tangible, and do not correspond to any political divisions. They are intellectual divisions, which exist primarily in the minds of individuals. With the one exception of Québec, which is commonly accepted as a region based on politics, the remaining

regions are largely defined by their geography. In the minds of most Canadians, the country is composed of five geographical regions: the West Coast, the Prairies, Central Canada, the Atlantic provinces, and Northern Canada. The exact boundaries of each region are not so clearly defined, and depend on the individual.

### **The West Coast**

British Columbia is the only province in the West Coast region. Although extremely mountainous, there is much geographical diversity, with many lowland valleys lying between the Rocky Mountains in the east of the province, and the Coastal Mountains to the west. Although British Columbia is sometimes referred to as 'the West', this term is relative, and depends on who is making the reference. A resident of an Atlantic province may consider Ontario to be a part of 'the West', whereas this is not the general idea of the reference to most other Canadians. The primary industries are forestry, fishing, mining, and most recently, tourism. With world class ski hills, spectacular beaches, stunning stands of old growth trees, and some of the most diverse and accessible outdoor recreation in Canada, BC has cornered the market on tourism. British Columbians believe that 'their' province is the most beautiful and enjoyable province. They perceive themselves as having the most 'laid back' attitude, and being the most 'in tune' with nature and all things natural. People from Vancouver see themselves as being a scaled down version of Toronto. They believe that Vancouver is the most important economical power in the West, but still has the advantage of clean and natural surroundings to slow down the pace of life.

### **The Prairies**

The Prairies are a well defined geographical area, composed of the largely flat provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The north of Saskatchewan and Manitoba is actually not plains, but rather a part of the rugged topography known as the Canadian Shield. However, since virtually the entire population lives in the southern area of the provinces, the image of the plains is generally the first thing mentioned when speaking of the prairie provinces. It should be noted that 'plains' refers to the landform, and 'prairie' refers to agriculture. Although considered by many Canadians as being strictly agricultural, the Prairies are becoming increasingly urbanised and have a variety of industries such as petroleum, mining, ranching, and generation of

hydroelectric power. The people of the Prairies are the first to mention that the land and the region is flat and somewhat boring. However, they also believe that the region is one of the friendliest in the country and often say that they would never want to leave it. With a largely agricultural history and sparse population, inhabitants of the Prairies have historically trusted and relied on each other during good times and bad. This has given rise to an exceptionally strong feeling of community.

### **Central Canada**

This area is most certainly Ontario and Québec even though most regionalist discussions speak of Québec on its own. Although the vast majority of these provinces is covered with the extremely rocky and rugged terrain of the Canadian Shield, 90% of the inhabitants live in the rich, fertile St. Laurence lowlands to the south. Southern Ontario and Québec are the urban business centres of the country and are home to approximately 50% of the country's population. The St. Laurence Seaway and Great Lakes system provide cheap transportation to the Atlantic markets and to the centrally located population centres of America. This has greatly facilitated the growth of the region as Canada's centre of manufacture of value added merchandise. The provinces also have the mineral and hydroelectric wealth of the Shield area, as well as some of the best agricultural land in the country.

Although the central provinces may be considered a 'region' geographically and even economically, the two provinces of Ontario and Québec are very different. The relative proximity of the major city centres of Québec City, Montréal, Ottawa, and Toronto makes one feel as though the difference between the two provinces is minimal. Particularly in Ottawa, Ontario and Montréal, Québec, one can feel the easy mixture of French and English. These two cities are also certainly the most bilingual metropolitan centres of the country. Ottawa's location on the provincial border and Montréal's very high population of Québec's English-speaking minority lend greatly to this feeling of sameness. However, outside of this area the feeling changes.

The people of Ontario are very proud of their bilingual nature, and feel, probably correctly, that they understand the Québec culture more than any other province. Although very conscious of having some of the worst environmental problems in the country, they feel their region has some of the best untouched wilderness in Canada. While the vast majority of people are city dwellers, many have summer cabins in the



central or northern parts of Ontario, or at the very least make an effort to visit those areas. Being the economic and political 'hot spot' of Canada, and one of the most bilingual of the English-speaking provinces, they are convinced that Ontario is the most opportune place to be in Canada.

Although Québec is another economic 'hot spot' in Canada, the nature of the province is vastly different than any other. I found that many Canadians in the West and Atlantic regions think of Quebecers as being almost the same as other Canadians — only they speak French. Quebecers, however, have been trying for a long time to make the rest of Canada understand that this is not the case. They have a culture and a language which, though based on their French heritage, is quite unlike that of modern France. It's unique, and has been shaped by years of fighting to maintain their distinct society. In fact, French Canada has never had a problem with self-identity. They see themselves as 'French', and have clung firmly to their roots in France. I have spoken with many people from France who feel that the people of Québec are even more nationalistic towards France than the French are.

### ***The Atlantic Provinces***

The East Coast provinces, loosely referred to as 'the Maritimes', comprise the provinces of Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. In reality, Newfoundland is not a Maritime province. It is, however, commonly referred to as one by people who do not live there. Although fishing is a staple industry of the Atlantic provinces, there is also significant agriculture and forestry in some areas. The reliance on fishing has created a very dispersed population, with small, remote, one industry fishing villages dotting the coastlines. However, in spite of this fragmentation, the inhabitants of the Atlantic provinces have a very highly developed regional consciousness. "They *are* different; they know they are different and they are proud of it! There is history, tradition, and culture in the region which people in a 'young' western Canada may not understand or appreciate."<sup>4)</sup> Plagued with unemployment, the residents of the Atlantic provinces are painfully aware of their economic problems which are perhaps the worst in Canada, yet they are also quite convinced that the Maritime region is the most laid back and peaceful place to live. Although other Canadians have a very strong stereotypical image of the Maritimes, each province has its own unique flavour, and there exists a sense of regionalism

within the Atlantic region. The people see themselves as all being in the same economic boat, but aside from that unifying factor they believe they are all very different. The island of Newfoundland is a particularly good example an Atlantic 'region within a region'. Although the inhabitants of 'The Rock' associate themselves with the Maritime provinces, they have only been a part of Canada since 1949, and still cling strongly to their largely Irish heritage. Newfoundland has its own anthem and a very strong awareness of its own special identity, much along the lines of Québec.<sup>5)</sup>

### **Northern Canada**

Northern Canada is usually referred to as everything north of the highly populated band running along the American border. In the 'far' North, the area to the north of the provinces, the population is a fraction of the total of the country and is the only area of Canada with a larger Native than non-Native population. Natural resources are either scarce or impractical and uneconomical to exploit. "Although few in number, some residents of the North think of the region as their *home*—an area not to be used or exploited to the advantage of 'southerners.'"<sup>6)</sup>

Although I've kept descriptions brief, I hope the non-Canadian reader can see that generally there is diversity between the regions, and unity within them. Although regionalist sentiments are often exaggerated, the underlying basis of their formation is quite easy to understand. People feel the way they do about their regions because that is the way the regions really are. They understand and relate well with each other. However, a large problem arises with the failure to understand other regions. Although many of the stereotypical views that Canadians have of each other are fairly accurate, sometimes they are inaccurate to the point of being damaging. For example, for the last ten years, Canada has been trying to form a new constitution which includes Québec. There has been little success and there is a strong feeling that Québec will separate from Canada. If this happens, the Atlantic provinces will effectively be cut off from the rest of Canada. It's commonly believed in the West that the Maritime provinces would readily join America if they were left in such a situation, creating a feeling that they are perhaps less 'Canadian' than the people of the West. It highlights the sentiment that the West is really on its own, and supports sympathy for Western separatism. However, when I posed the question involving Québec's separation to

people from all of the Maritime provinces, their answer was completely opposite to the western belief. They affirmed with no hesitation that they would never want to join America. They are, in fact, extremely 'Canadian', perhaps even more so than the people of the West. Once again, Canadians fall victim to their lack of understanding of the other regions.

## Factors Influencing Regional Formation and Their Perpetuation

It seems incredible that Canada was able to form a national unit in face of the natural obstacles of east-west orientation. It would have been much easier to form political units following the natural geographic north-south orientation of North America. Even today, geography serves only as a hindrance to Canadian Unity. As settlement began in the Maritime and central provinces, the first obstacle settlers had to face was the Canadian Shield. The Shield is an enormous high plateau of granite stretching from northern Saskatchewan through to Labrador. It is exceptionally rough terrain with a very hostile climate. Historically the Shield was a part of the glue binding the young nation. In the early days of trapping, no other region surpassed the Shield for its beaver pelts. As the fur trade declined, the Shield's mineral resources were increasingly exploited. Regardless of the resource, the economy generated from the Shield has encouraged settlement and exploration. However, as settlement progressed to the west, the Shield, retarding the natural westward progression of farming into the Prairies, has served as a natural barrier between eastern and western Canada. Even today the journey through the Canadian Shield area is a long and difficult one, and lends little binding strength to a cohesive Canadian unit.

Once past the Canadian Shield, other obstacles lay in the way of east-west colonisation — namely, the Rocky and Coastal Mountain ranges of British Columbia. Upon completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, settlers were given incentives to make the journey west and settle. Once settled, the new British Columbians were cut off from the rest of the country by the Rockies, much as the four western provinces were cut off from central Canada by the Shield, and were left to develop on their own. Although Canadian history is brief, a species of divergent evolution occurred, giving rise to sub-cultures within the collective history and culture of the country.

These natural barriers, as much as anything else have given rise to the particularly strong regionalist mentality of British Columbia.

Geographical barriers have historically driven Canada towards division. It would seem, however, that with today's technology the barriers should be easily broken. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. The drive across Canada is still extremely long and difficult and domestic flights are prohibitively expensive. A trip across Canada can easily cost as much as a trip to Europe. As a result of this, and the sheer vastness of the country, most Canadians have never had the opportunity to see the rest of their country. In fact, most Canadians have never even fully explored their own provinces. This lack of knowledge of the other areas of Canada results in the evolution of stereotypes of those areas. Not that all stereotypes are necessarily wrong, but they are based on generalisations rather than on first hand information and group areas under one blanket definition, completely ignoring the diversity within them. Unfortunately, the Canadian school system has done little to remedy the situation. Unlike America, which has a very strongly American studies based curriculum, Canada doesn't go far enough. The emphasis in the school system is on international studies, with few mandatory programmes in Canadian studies. Canada is a nation vastly ignorant of itself.

Further contributing to regional polarisation is Ottawa's inability to create a sense of equality amongst the regions of modern Canada. Historically, the country was organised according to the 'heartland-hinterland' concept. The 'heartland' was, of course, the populous consuming area of southern Ontario and Québec. The 'hinterland' was essentially all other areas of the country which produced supplies for the 'heartland'. This view of Canada has become outdated, with regional economies growing stronger with time. For example, British Columbia, which was once one of the more remote areas of the 'hinterland', has now become a major trading centre, with exports of raw materials and imports of manufactured goods as heavily tied to East Asian markets as to eastern Canadian markets. In fact, Vancouver may be considered the 'heartland' of BC, acting as a hub of commerce for the rest of the raw materials producing British Columbia 'hinterland'. Instead of becoming more nationalistic towards a more prosperous Canada, westerners become more regionalistic, resenting Ottawa's continued treatment of British Columbia as their 'hinterland'. This resentment is not restricted to British Columbia. Other regions also resent the 'big-brother little-brother', 'heartland-

hinterland' structure of the political and economic system. Instead of feeling like an important part of the whole, they feel like semi-autonomous satellites sending their tax dollars to be spent largely in the central region, which seemingly neglects other regions. This regional inequality is largely a political question. More often than not in Canada, political parties spend money with the intention of protecting their own interests. As the bulk of voting Canadians live in Ontario and Québec, these regions are often given preferential status regarding benefits. Although most Canadians realise this, it doesn't make it any more justifiable to them. The regions begin to want more autonomy and to keep their tax dollars to be spent in their respective provinces instead of in Ontario and Québec. Certainly this issue is not so simple as stated here, but that is how the average Canadian sees the situation as it stands. Perhaps it all boils down to Ottawa's inability to keep the general public informed. In any case, it does little to further Canada's sense of unity.

## American Influence on Canadian Culture and Identity

The most apparent cause of the Canadian identity crisis lies directly to the south of Canada. The United States, Canada's most important neighbour and closest ally, is also its largest problem with respect to identity. Although Canadians do not consider themselves to be exactly the same as Americans, the fact remains that Canada is slowly aligning with the United States in many areas, including economics, behaviour, and even linguistics. The observant reader will note the spelling in this article is Canadian, which is the same as British. However, American spellings and grammar are definitely becoming easier to find in Canada. It seems that American words just keep slipping in. In fact, many facets of American culture keep slipping in. With such a powerful and overbearing neighbour, it's difficult to remain independent. How is it that the American influence is so strong on Canada, while Canadian influence on the United States is negligible?

Proximity is the most obvious factor governing the flow of American culture and ideology into Canada. With 3 out of 4 Canadians living within 150 kilometres of the American border, exposure to the American way of life is as simple as a Sunday drive. In fact it is quite normal for Canadians to cross the border to do their shopping. Lured by significantly lower costs of goods and gas, there is a constant cross border

flow of Canadians. Yet a recent cross border study of two neighbouring cities, one American and one Canadian, both situated very close to the border, has shown that while Canadians are very well informed about Americans, Americans have very little idea of what a Canadian is. That is to say that the societal impact of the border is felt more profoundly by Canadians, in spite of such frequent contact. This would be understandable if the study had been done on a national level. Not only do a much larger percent of Canadians live near the border than Americans, the Canadian cities flanking the border are the largest population centres. Vancouver, Montréal, and Toronto are much closer to American influence than Miami, Los Angeles, and New York are to Canadian influence. Therefore, the trend is for Canadians to be largely affected by and informed about American society and not the reverse.<sup>7)</sup> It is, however, difficult to explain how a city so close to the border has such little knowledge of the people who continually visit them from the north. Regardless of the explanation, this imbalance of knowledge does serve as an indicator of the strength of the flow of American ideas and information into Canada.

Geography plays another role in the northern flow of American culture. While America has developed in a north-south direction along the coastlines, Canada has a west-east orientation, and the tendency has always been for Canadians to turn to their southern neighbours first. They were closer and more accessible than other distant Canadian cities. Even today it would make very little sense for a resident of Vancouver, British Columbia to tackle the Rockies to get to Edmonton for goods or services, when they could simply drive south to Seattle in the United States. The federal government has historically made an effort to curb this north-south flow of trade and ideas by imposing tariffs. However, in 1988 the Free Trade legislation was passed, much to the disappointment of many Canadian nationalists. Being political as opposed to geographical, the border is the only thing which historically has stopped Canadians from becoming completely Americanised. Nationalists feel that protectionist trade barriers strengthen the political border and are the best defence against being culturally annexed by America. This has turned out not to be the case. Although the economic impact of Free Trade has not yet been fully realised, the cultural drain on Canada seems minor. More correctly, the increase in cultural drain seems minor. Since Free Trade, Canada hasn't been swallowed whole by America, and for the average Canadian, life is progressing the same as before. Perhaps in the past, annexation was a real

possibility. However, in spite of Canada's drawbacks and formidable economic difficulties, Canadians are happier living in Canada than they would be in America.

By far the largest avenue by which the aforementioned cultural flow travels is the media. There has been an exceptionally strong American influence on Canadian culture, largely propagated by the reception of U. S. television broadcasts in Canada. Having the CBC as the only national television network, other television channels are either received directly from America or are heavily laden with American programming, including soap operas, situational comedies, movies, and news. Although Canadian news programmes tend to be very international, the news received on American networks focuses very heavily on current U.S. affairs. This allows Canadians to learn a great deal about all aspects of America and its people. It is an asset to receive so much information from the United States. Other types of programming, however, are another matter. As sitcoms, television movies and dramas become popular in Canada, they are also becoming emulated, particularly by the younger members of society. Even changes in the English language made popular by American television and movies eventually work their way up to Canada and are incorporated into daily speech. This also holds true for a variety of fads and trends. Mimicked fads do, however, tend to be toned down a great deal. Canadians have often had little love for American excesses. This is a reflection of the conservative nature of the Canadian mentality.<sup>8)</sup> Nonetheless, even toned down American fads are still American fads, and further contribute to the feeling that Canadian culture sometimes belongs more to America than it does to Canada.

In spite of the overwhelming influence of American culture and alignment of economic values and lifestyles, Canadians are increasingly conscious of the differences between the two societies. Politically, economically, and socially, there are feelings of divergence. When asked, "How do Canadians and Americans differ?", many Canadians described themselves using words such as 'quieter', 'more culturally sensitive', 'less abrasive', and even 'weaker'. The themes of Canada's advanced social welfare and health care system were also commonly discussed, clearly demonstrating the feeling that Canadians see themselves as being a more benevolent society than America. Many people also expressed the fact that it's much safer north of the border. In fact, when Canadians enter America, they are aware of it from the minute they cross the border. This awareness arises from an increased sensation of personal danger. In

America, as opposed to Canada, there is little gun control, and it's disconcerting to know that the person beside you may be armed. Although crime exists in Canada, the amount of violent crime involving guns is a fraction of that in the United States, and "no Canadian feels he has a God-given right to carry a gun."<sup>9)</sup>

Without realising it, Canadians often use America as a standard to define what they *are not*, instead of looking at themselves and discovering independently what they *are*. In doing so they further lose sight of their own identity. In any case, Canadian self-identity has progressed to the point where even if they can't articulate exactly what a Canadian is, they know what they're not, and it's not American.

## Multiculturalism

Perhaps one of the more significant contributors to the Canadian identity crisis is multiculturalism. "Who are we and where do we come from" is an easy question to answer for most nations. Japan, for example, has a very rich and a very long history with which the Japanese people can identify. In spite of recent increases in immigration, the Japanese know and understand what it means to be Japanese. If only it were so simple in Canada.

Although Canada has a history stretching almost 500 years, it is still young compared to most nations. From the days of early settlement until the constitutional reform in 1982, Canadian identity was based largely upon the principle of 'two founding peoples'.<sup>10)</sup> It was a single nation composed of French and English immigrants. However, that identity had to change. After the Second World War, in particular during the 1950's and 1960's, the rate of growth of population was staggering. Between the years of 1941 and 1976, the population grew from 11 million to 22 million citizens. Around 2 million of these people were immigrants, mostly of non-English and non-French origin. Canada could no longer base its policies on the principle of 'two founding peoples'. The country was rapidly becoming a nation of nations. On July 21, 1988, the Multiculturalism Act became law. Although there are many sides to the act, it was tabled to acknowledge the "contributions of Canadians of all origins and their communities to the building of Canada."<sup>11)</sup> Canada has legislated against discrimination based on ethnic origin, and has officially recognised the potential of the cultural diversity of Canadians, in terms of language ability and cultural awareness. This high



sensitivity to, and awareness of other cultures is a very recognised Canadian trait. Although The Official Languages Act guarantees the equality of French and English as Canada's two official languages, there are provisions to guarantee language rights to non-anglophone (English) and non-francophone (French) Canadians. Most importantly, there is a special section of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which is perhaps uniquely Canadian. Special attention must be paid to Canada's multicultural identity when interpreting other areas of the Charter of Rights. This clause has been the indirect source of much controversy and has raised questions as to what it means to be Canadian. A good, although worn out, example is the case involving the standard dress code of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The 'Mounties' are a Canadian institution which has a history dating back to the early days of Canada. Their uniform is well known internationally and is a part of Canada's heritage. Several years ago, a Sikh Indian joined the Mounties and challenged the dress code. Instead of wearing the traditional headwear, he insisted that he be allowed to wear his turban on religious grounds. The Canadian courts allowed his request, much to the surprise of many Canadians. I'm not judging whether the ruling was right or wrong. My only purpose is to demonstrate how people are quickly losing sight of their Canadian identity as multiculturalism gradually influences culture. Such highly publicised examples as this cause much confusion amongst 2nd generation Canadians, and even amongst immigrant Canadians who have decided to accept Canadian culture as it stands, instead of trying to adapt it to their native culture.

Although at times difficult, people are accepting that they are in the process of forming a new identity and multiculturalism is part of it.

### ***Melting pot or Mosaic ?***

Although America is also a nation of nations, their society is commonly referred to as a melting pot. That is to say that everybody is an English-speaking American first and foremost. Although immigrants hold on to their respective cultures, the expectation is that they will eventually blend in. Canadians, particularly English-speaking Canadians, prefer to use the term mosaic to describe their society. Ethnic minorities are encouraged to maintain and develop their distinct heritage. Although racism and misunderstanding have most certainly been present, Canada is becoming very accustomed to the idea of a cultural mosaic. Daily interactions with groups such as German-Canadians,

Chinese-Canadians, or Japanese-Canadians have given non-ethnic Canadians a first-hand experience of ethnic heritage and culture, traces of which are inevitably internalised.

With respect to identity, multiculturalism has affected English Canada far more than French Canada. The French Canadians perceive multiculturalism as the most significant threat to their existence as a distinct society. They see immigration, which often results in non-French development, as a dilution of their unique culture, which is neither French nor Canadian as perceived by English Canadians. Québec greatly favours the concept of the cultural melting pot over that of the cultural mosaic. They would prefer every immigrant to speak French as a principal language and to become a part of the Québec culture. Much of this is accomplished through language rights. In Québec, unless a student's mother is first language English, the student must speak French at school. In English Canada, however, this is not the case. In many schools in Vancouver, more than 40% of the students have a non-official language as a first language and it is that language which is often spoken outside of the classroom. This leads to a great deal of alienation, even amongst the immigrant population.

It's ironic that multiculturalism, which asks Canadians to identify with immigrant cultures, finds the immigrant population having just as much trouble identifying with Canadian culture. Today, many second generation ethnic Canadians do not know where they stand. They are in a type of cultural void. They can't speak their parents' native language fluently and they no longer really understand their native culture, yet they cling to it more strongly than their parents did. An example is that of the Italian-Canadians. Not only are the new generations losing most or all of the language, but they also have a distorted view of modern Italian culture. This is a result of being raised in neo-Italian-Canadian culture, with no exposure to authentic Italian culture. However, when they compare their perception of Italy's rich, ancient, strongly defined heritage with the young, undeveloped culture of Canada, they choose to identify with Italy. They feel the lack of Canadian self-awareness and turn elsewhere to find an identity, even though that identity is not their own.

## Three Distinct Societies

The existence of three distinct societies of Aboriginal peoples, English, and French, has been a major contributing factor to the retarded growth of a Canadian self-identity. Although being a nation of distinct societies is in fact an important part of the definition of Canada, the vision of how Canada is and how it should be differ significantly between the three groups. Matters are becoming further complicated with the increasing importance of multiculturalism. The idea of three distinct societies is no longer completely valid. Within the French community there is a great deal of unity. French Canadians refer to themselves as 'francophone' and to all non-French Canadians as 'anglophone'. However, within modern 'English' society there are also large sub-groups of Chinese-Canadians, Italian-Canadians, and so on, which has caused a major block in the formation of any self-identity within 'English' Canada. The term 'anglophone' no longer describes non-French society as being English speaking only. One of the three distinct societies is now 'nondistinct'.

Although the benefits of living in such a culturally diverse nation are great, they do not come without a fair amount of difficulty. One of the largest problems has been trying to create an official agreement between the three distinct societies on the definition of Canada and the place of each society within it. Over the last twenty five years, the Canadian government has been trying desperately to create a new constitution which would include the special interests of all parties, particularly the interests of the Natives and French. They came close to success in 1982, when nine of ten provinces signed an accord, leaving French Québec as the only objector.<sup>12)</sup> Since that time the government has been trying to lure Québec into a new constitution, as well as satisfy Aboriginal demands, by offering special status and increased power to the two distinct societies. This, of course, sits poorly with English Canadians, who envision a new constitution with equal rights for all. They find it difficult to understand the need for some special rights to be entrenched in the constitution for groups whose very survival as distinct peoples may be at stake. For example, almost all immigrants to Canada choose to be English speaking. This factor, combined with a rising anglophone birth rate and a declining francophone birth rate, has caused much concern over the continuation of a distinctly French Québec. In fact, these factors were primary

to the development of the nationaliste movement, which has carried through to this day.<sup>13)</sup> Special measures may need to be taken to ensure that French Québec and other distinct groups do not disappear.

At the moment, there is much talk of the possible separation of Québec from Canada. This is not an uncommon discussion in Canada. However, it seems that the French are beginning to believe that a Canada that includes the interests of Québec will never exist. Consider the difficulty that would arise if Japan and Korea decided to join politically and form a new country. It is a seemingly impossible task. Perhaps if the anglophone community did more to understand the francophones by learning French and travelling to Québec, and if the francophones made a greater attempt at becoming a part of the Canadian identity, there would be some hope. The question is whether or not it can make it before Québec decides to separate.

In the worst case scenario of the English-French crisis, Québec will separate and Canada will be a country of nine provinces and the Territories. Although the feeling would surely be less than amicable, the separation would be peaceful. What about the current inability to reach an accord with the Natives? They do not live in a politically defined area and therefore cannot separate. Nor can the non-Natives separate. Both share the same land. The Aboriginal peoples see all of the land as their own and want large areas, much of it commercially developed, returned to them. This goes against the interests of the non-Native peoples, who are willing to settle with the Natives over land claims, but not willing to give up prime land. The animosity between them leaves little room for mutual understanding and development of a common identity. In addition to land claims disputes, there is also the question of land use, including Native fishing and hunting rights. The depth of these disputes goes well beyond the scope of this paper, however it is important to mention that the tensions are continuing to mount between the two groups. There certainly exists the threat of violent conflict, and shots have been fired in the more heated disputes. There is also the problem with the smuggling of illegal goods into Canada across the US border on Indian reserves. Even urban Natives do not consider this to be a problem and justify it in the same way as they do for land use rights. They feel they are a people without borders and are not bound by the same laws controlling the non-Natives. This concept of legal exclusion is very difficult for the non-Native population to accept. Conflicts based on these misunderstandings have been violent in the past and may

continue to be so. People do want to reach agreements, but with such different philosophies it will be exceptionally difficult to accomplish. There are many demands yet to be met and many disputes to be settled before all Canadians will be able to find their own comfortable position within the definition of the word 'Canadian'.

## What is the Canadian Identity?

The purpose of this article is not to convince the reader that Canadians have no self-identity. Rather, I wrote this to discuss the Canadian weakness in identifying itself and the reasons behind that weakness. So what does Canada have that it can call its own? What is a Canadian? Ironically, Canadian identity is a composite of many of the factors mentioned in this paper—the very same factors cited as reasons for its lack of self-identity. It is this type of typically Canadian contradiction which makes definitions so difficult to create. So many of the things tearing Canada apart, such as cultural and regional affiliations, are at the same time identifying it and holding it together.<sup>14)</sup>

Although one of the greatest challenges to Canadian unity, the concept of 'three distinct societies' is one of Canada's most unique and identifiable factors. In particular, its official bilingual status is something used both by Canadians and non-Canadians when describing the country. That the three groups have problems communicating and agreeing with one another is clear. However, the fact remains that distinct societies are one of the Canadian fingerprints.

That it is a nation of nations is another important part of the Canadian portrait. Multiculturalism is now commonly considered an integral aspect of the contemporary Canadian identity. However, it is not just its cultural mosaic society which makes Canada unique. The connection with multiculturalism goes beyond the national level. Each individual Canadian is becoming increasingly sensitive and tolerant to other cultures. I believe that the level of tolerance is unique and is something which Canadians can speak of proudly. I'm certainly not implying that all other countries lack cultural sensitivity. However, Canada's heterogeneous society has trained it to be exceptionally tolerant of race and culture.

Quite consistent with popular belief, Canada is in fact a country of nature lovers and

environmentalists. Although largely city dwellers, they have maintained their connection with the non-urban areas of the country. This of course has everything to do with the extraordinary availability of nature as well as the unique Canadian appreciation of it. Closely related to this love of nature is a love for wide open spaces. Canada has a very space oriented society. Upon entering Canada, there is an immediate feeling of emptiness—a realisation that even where man's traces can be seen man's presence cannot always be felt. Although this is unusual in the world, it is something which Canadians consider very normal. 'Getting away from it all' is something which most Canadians don't even consciously plan or think about. For most, being alone with nature is a normal part of life. Even in Vancouver, a deserted beach or park area is not difficult to find. There is so much space per citizen that Canadians tend to take for granted how lucky they are—until they travel, of course. When they see how crowded other places can be, it makes them especially aware of how important personal space is to a Canadian. It seems incredible to them that Japanese people are able live so successfully in such small spaces all of their lives.

A conservative nature is certainly a part of Canadian identity. Canadians generally like to 'play it safe' and maintain a feeling of security. This explains their somewhat socialist political beliefs. People do not even question whether there should be government-run health care, social welfare, or unemployment insurance. It's assumed that these services will be provided as long as taxes continue to be paid. Canada does have a benevolent society. However, the desire for these programmes stems just as much from the Canadian need of security, even at the national level.

Canadians are also very laid back and passive as a society, preferring to let nature take its course instead of trying to change it. Of all of the developed countries I've lived in, none has been more stress free than Canada. Most recently, they have seen themselves as international peace keepers, with some of the largest contingents of troops being sent on UN peacekeeping missions. They find this a pleasing contrast to the powerful, militarily-oriented United States. Canadians have never been an aggressive people and this new international role suits them very well.

In spite of the long discussion of American influences on Canadian culture, Canadians do have an identity unique from that of the United States. Anyone who has travelled through the U.S. may recognise that many of the qualities listed as distinctly Canadian are very different than qualities in the United States, even though they may have some

exterior similarity. It is clear that Canadians are similar in many ways to the people of the United States. However, Canada's identity is its own.

#### Afterword....

That Canadians have an identity crisis is certain. There clearly exists an identity, only they have difficulty understanding it. If Canadians could overcome mental obstacles such as regionalism and regionalistic stereotyping, they could begin to reach for true national unity. If it were possible, there should be a rule that every Canadian must visit the other nine provinces before leaving school. They would discover that although lifestyles often differ from region to region, the people are actually very similar in beliefs and values. The diversity amongst them is great, but there is a common tie which binds them. They *are* unique as Canadians.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1) Harry H. Hiller, *Canadian Society: A Macro Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Scarborough, Ont: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 6.
- 2) Donald K. Alper, Robert L. Monahan and Donald C. Wilson, *Canada: Northern Neighbor*, (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University Center for Canadian and Canadian-American Studies, 1988), p. 5.
- 3) Lewis J. Robinson, *Concepts and Themes in the Regional Geography of Canada*, (Vancouver, BC: Talonbooks, 1990), p.271.
- 4) Robinson, p.61.
- 5) "Newfoundland: Can the Province Be Saved?," *Maclean's*, 23 Aug. 1993, p.21.
- 6) Robinson, p.266.
- 7) Roger Gibbins, *Canada as a Borderlands Society*. (Orono, Me: n. p., 1989), p.21.
- 8) Kenneth McNaught, *The Penguin History of Canada*, (England: Clays Ltd., Stlves, plc, 1988), p.297.
- 9) Pierre Berton, "My Country," (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, n.d); rpt. in *Mosaici*, 2nd ed. Brenda Wegmann and Miki Prijic Knezevic, eds. (United States: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p.11.
- 10) Barbara Rudolph, "Beyond No," *Time*, 9Nov. 1992, p.24.
- 11) Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, *The Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, (Ottaw, Ont.: n. p., 1990), p.1.

- 12) Rudolph, p.23.
- 13) McNaught, p.290.
- 14) Pierre Berton, *Why We Act Like Canadians: A Personal Exploration of Our National Character*, (n.p., n.d.), p.12.

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